UNIT 1 MAHASWETA DEVI: SALT
TRANSLATION: SARMISHTA DUTTA GUPTA

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall examine Mahasweta Devi’s short story SALT and place the author in the context of themes and issues, form and content, in the Bengali short story, having surveyed the Bangla short story. After reading the unit, you will be able to appreciate Mahasweta Devi’s contribution to this important genre.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

With this unit we begin introducing you to the classical contemporary writers of short story in Indian literature. Mahasweta Devi is one such writer. To begin with you will gloss through the origins and development of the short story in Bengali over the years in different phases, touching on themes and issues and important women writers as well. We shall then introduce you to Mahasweta Devi’s life and works and then take up a detailed discussion on her short story SALT.

1.2 A SURVEY OF THE BENGALI SHORT STORY

1.2.1 Origins

The short story is the youngest literary genre in Bengal, the creation of the modern age. But its origins have a long history, in the oral traditions of Bengal. Written in verse, the ancient legends, folktales and fairy tales of
Bengal are full of earthy vitality; they deal, not only with the lives of kings and queens and the magic of the spiritual and the supernatural, but also with the emotions and experiences of ordinary mortals. The characters are vividly drawn; love, often unrequited, is the usual theme. The origins of the short story may also be traced back to written sources such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and other narrative poems such as Mangalkavyas, which deal with ordinary people.

In Bengal, the impact of colonial culture made itself felt from the late eighteenth century onwards. The printing press became a major instrument of this transformation, for it made knowledge accessible to everyone, and provided diverse avenues for creative self-expression. The birth of literary journals and the rise of prose also facilitated the emergence of a new literary tradition in Bengal. The novel made its appearance, and was soon followed by the rise of the novella or short novel. Here, we find several antecedents of the short story as a genre; the churnak or anecdote; the akhyan or fable; the naksaha or portrait; and the short novel or novella.

A major precursor of the Bengali short story was novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterji. The first edition of his novel Indira, published in 1872, was a brief narrative hailed by later critics as one of the earliest examples of the Bengali short story. The fast-paced narrative is concise; the plot focuses on a single story-line with very few events, only the major characters are developed in detail. Jugalanguriya (1874) and Radhurani (1875) are similar in structure and conception.

Bankim Chandra’s brothers, Purnachandra and Sanjeevchandra Chatterji, also experimented with the form of the short story. In 1873, Purnachandra Chatterji published a story titled “Madhumati” in Bangadarshan. In the following year, Sanjeevchandra published two stories, “Damini” and “Rameswarer Adrishta” (“Rameswar’s Destiny”), in the periodical Bhraman. In 1877, Rabindrannath published “Bikharini” (“The Beggar Woman”) in the journal Bharati. “Madhumati” was described as a novel when it appeared. The structure is simple, though the narrative focuses on melodramatic action rather than character, evoking a mysterious atmosphere. “Bikharini,” written in Tagore’s early years, conjures up the mystery of a far-away, unfamiliar world, reminiscent of the tales of Edgar Allan Poe.

1.2.2 The First Phase (1873-1890)

This period begins with the publication of “Madhumati” and ends with the appearance of the periodical Hitabadi in 1891. During this period, there was great public interest in the short story in Bengal. The subject-matter of the short story also acquired greater range and diversity, focusing on the joys and sorrows of life. The form of these early short stories was in part determined by the requirements of the periodicals in which they appeared. Dinabandhu Mitra’s stories, “Yamalaye Jibanta Manush” (“Live Humans in Hell”) and “Pora Maheswar”, display a strong humorous vein. “Kusumkumari”, anonymously published in Bangamithir (1280 in the Bengali calendar) is one of the first Bengali stories to develop a closely woven plot. “James Bramton”, (anonymous: Masik Samalochak, 1286) anticipates the adventure story and detective fiction. “Nidrita Pranay” (“Dormant Love”) (anonymous: Bangadarshan, 1282) is an allegory. Several stories rewrite myths and legends in a comic or satiric vein. “Chanchala” (“The Restless One”)
(anonymous; Nalini, 1286) and Tarak Nath Gangopadhyay’s “Lalit O Saudamini” (“Lalit and Saudamini”) (Gyananik O Pratibhinha, 1288) focus on the secret anguish of a woman’s heart, and the issue of women’s freedom. Two early stories by Tagore, “Ghater Katha” (“The Tale of the Riverside”) and “Rajpather Katha” (“The Tale of the Highway”) (Nabajiban, 1291) also belong to this stage in the development of the short story, because of the descriptive quality that distinguishes them from Tagore’s later, more mature short fiction.

From 1884 to 1890, the Bengali short story made great advances. Stories like the anonymous “Boro Galpo Noy” (“Not a Long Story”) (Nabajiban, 1291) satirize the Brahmo Samaj. Others, such as “Bhajaharir Biye” (“Bhajahari’s Marriage”) and “Bhuter Galpo” (“Ghost Story”) are humorous pieces that anticipate the writings of Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay. “Jamini” combines humour with suspense. Many of these stories have happy endings.

1.2.3 Later Phase

Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932) and Nagendranath Gupta (1861-1949) also took great interest in this new literary form. Swarnakumari’s writing is tasteful and distinguished. All her stories express a hidden pain. Her narrative style is strongly influenced by Bankim Chandra. Some of her well-known stories are “Kumar Bhubasingha”, “Sanyasini” (“The Female Ascetic”) “Amar Jiban” (“My Life”) and “Gahana” (“Jewelry”). Nagendranath Gupta was Tagore’s contemporary. A prolific writer of short stories, he paid little attention to craftsmanship, favouring the short descriptive tale or fable. He also wrote fairy tales for children. His well-known stories include “Churi Na Bahaduri” (“Theft or Bravery”) (1294, Bengali year), “Duiabar” (“Twice”) (1296 B.yr), which describes a woman’s love for a sanyasi or ascetic, “Bhairavi” (1296 B. yr), set in the time of the Mutiny, and “Shyamari Kahini” (“The Story of Shyama”), dealing with female psychology in a way that anticipates the writings of Sharatchandra.

Rabindranath Tagore: Tagore published six of his mature short stories in the journal Hitabadi, launched in 1891. “Dena Paona” (“Dues”), “Postmaster”, “Ginni” (“The Housewife”), “Ramkaniaer Nirbuddhita” (“The Foolishness of Ramkanai”), “Byabadhan” (“The Separation”) and “Taraprasaner Kirti” (“The Exploits of Taraprasanna”) have none of the artificial, laboured quality of his earlier efforts. The style is natural, the structure carefully created. Tagore was the first to use the term chhotogalpa for the short story. His stories are brief, with few characters, usually focused on a single protagonist. Most stories emphasize nuanced emotion, rather than external events. In the three volumes of Galpaguchchha, 84 of his short stories have been compiled. The last story in the third volume, “Chorai Dhan” (“Stolen Treasure”), was published in 1340 (B. yr). Some of his stories deal with contemporary realities, while others are set in the remote past. The characters range from kings and queens to workers and peasants. Nature in Tagore’s stories is not just a backdrop but an active participant in the human narrative. Major themes include love in its various manifestations, intricate family relationships, social customs, and the supernatural. Tagore wrote chiefly about the urban and rural middle class. But he revealed a deep sympathy for the sufferers of the impoverished. His stories are particularly notable for their representation of the female psyche, as in “Nashtaneed” (“Broken Nest”), “Maanbhjan” (“Pacification”) or “Pratihimsa” (“Revenge”).
Humour and satire: Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay (1847-1919) was a patriotic writer who expressed his strong social conscience through the use of humour and satire, in his four collections of short stories, “Bhut O Manush” (“Ghosts and Men”) (1817), “Muktamala” (“The Pearl Necklace”) (1901), “Majar Galpo” (“A Funny Story”) (1905) and “Damaru Charit” (“The Character of Damaru”) (1923). Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay (1873-1972) wrote perfectly-constructed stories on sentimental themes, avoiding the complexities of human emotion. Some of his stories are notable for their humour, such as “Bou-Churi” (“Stealing the Bride”), “Sachcharitra” (“The Good Man”, a satire) and “Kurono Meye” (“The Foundling”). Other writers known for the comic element in their works are Surendranath Majumdar, Kedarnath Bandyopadhyay and Parashuram.

Pramatha Chowdhury and Saratchandra Chatterjee: The stories of Pramatha Chowdhury (1868-1946), collected in a volume entitled Galpasankalan (1941), have two chief narrators, Nillohit and Ghoshal, both liars; for it was Pramatha Chowdhury’s conviction that imagination, which people often mistake for falsehood, is the raw material of literature.

Saratchandra’s genius as a novelist reveals itself also in his short stories, which are teeming with characters, seeking plenitude rather than brevity. There is an excess of sentiment, bordering on melodrama. He deals with familiar social and family situations, especially with woman as the centre of provincial Bengali society, and middle-class life. He wrote from his own intimate knowledge of a conservative, exploitative society. Some of his well-known stories include “Mandi” (“Temple”), “Kashinath”, “Mamlar Phal” (“The Verdict”), “Mejdi” (“The Second Sister”), “Abhagir Swarga” (“Heaven for the Unfortunate Woman”), “Mahesh” and “Poreshi”.

Major themes: A host of minor writers also produced a large number of short stories on a variety of themes, such as rustic life, the complexities of human relationships, child psychology and the lives of people located outside Bengal. The detective story, the ghost story and the historical narrative were popular sub-genres.

Tradition and modernity: Writers belonging to different coteries, through short stories published in certain reputed journals, engaged in a war of words over the relative merits of tradition and modernity. The journals Sadhana and Manasi O Marmabani, for instance, championed the extreme orthodox position endorsed by Jogendranath Chattopadhyay, Sarojnath Ghosh and Manik Bhattacharya. In the early twentieth century, writers of the Bharati group (Tagore, Swarnakumari, Hiranmayi and Saraladebi) opposed such conservatism, wishing to connect Bengali literature to world literary traditions. Saratchandra’s stories also dramatize the struggle between the moral law and the emotions of the heart. The periodical Sabujpatra was launched in 1321 (B.yr) at the instance of Tagore, who urged the editor Pramatha Choudhury to attack the Hindu conservatism of Bipinchandra Pal, who had criticized Tagore in the journal Narayan. Other periodicals, such as Bangiya Musalman Patrika (1325) and Moslem Bharat (1327) attempted to represent the Muslim experience. Kazi Nazrul Islam began his career as a short story writer in the Bangiya Musalman Patrika.
Women writers: After Swarnakumari in the nineteenth century, numerous 
women writers distinguished themselves in the craft of the short story. 
Nirupama Debi wrote of the sufferings of women and Anurupa Debi described 
the glory of Hindu culture. The stories of Shanta Debi and Sita Debi 
dramatised the conflict between the female psyche and the demands of 
modernity. Other important women writers included Sushila Sen, 
Kanchananala Debi, Suniti Debi, Jyotirmoyee Debi, Mrinalini Sen, etc.

The Romantic wave: After World War I, there arose a wave of romanticism 
in the Bengali short story, exemplified in the short stories of Nazrul Islam. 
The periodical Kallol (1923) was launched by a group of young writers led by 
Achintyakumar Sengupta, who targeted Tagore’s followers, labeling them old-
fashioned. The Kallol group proclaimed the advent of a new age in Bengali 
literature.

Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay: 
Bibhutibhushan (1894-1950) published his first short story “Upekshita” (“The 
Neglected One”) in Prabasi in 1921. Subsequently, he published several 
Volumes of short stories that testify to his longing for harmony between the 
human and natural worlds: Meghamallar (“The Meghamallar Raga”, 1931), 
Yatribbadal (“Change of Passengers” 1934), Janma O Mrityu (“Birth and 
Death”), Asadharan (“Extraordinary”), etc.

Tarashankar (1898-1971) wrote primarily on rural themes; his stories are full 
of working-class characters, such as gypsies, patuas (folk-artists), garland-
makers, lathiyals (wielders of the lathi or stave), etc. He published several 
anthologies of short stories, including Pashanpuri (“The Stone Palace”), 
Nikantha (“Shiva”), Chhalanamayi (“The Deceitful Woman”), and 
Teenshunya (“The Three Zeros”).

World War II and after: The impact of World War II and the turbulence 
preceding Partition and Independence, changed the course of the Bengali short 
story, generating narratives scarred by the harsh reality of conflict. Writers 
such as Narayan Gangopadhyay (“Itihaas”), Subodh Ghosh (“Fossil”, 
“Ajantrik”), Narendra Nath Mitra (“Rasa”), Jyotirindra Nandi (“Khetna or “The 
Toy”), Samarendra Basu (“Adaab”) and Bimal Kar (“Angurlata” or “The 
Grapevine”) wrote stories that demonstrate this change of approach.

Post-Independence narratives: From the 1950s to the 1970s, the short story 
also acquired greater formal sophistication, as writers began to pay as much 
attention to the craft of fiction, as to the subject matter and content of their 
stories. During this period, there was growing disenchantment with the 
administration, exacerbated by military encounters with neighbouring 
countries, creating a mood of alienation, frustration and pessimism amongst 
the youth. These developments also left their mark on the short story in 
Bengal, which began to focus increasingly on introverted protagonists. 
Writers such as Debes Ray, Mati Nandi, Shyamal Gangopadhyay, Shirshendu 
Mukhopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Kabita Sinha, Syed Mustafar Siraj, 
Atin Bandopadhyay and Dibendu Palit voiced the angst and despair of this 
historical moment. Themes included the refugee issue (Ratan Ghattacharya’s 
“Pinjar” or “The Cage”), prostitution (Sunil Gangopadhyay’s “Biswaalhata” 
or “Traitor”), the political turbulence of the early seventies (Shirshendu 
Mukhopadhyay’s “Niru Dukka” or “Niru’s Grief”, Samaresh Basu’s “Bibek” 
or “Conscience”), love (Jyotirindra Nandi’s “Juban” or “Youth,” 
Sandipan Chattopadhyay’s “Mirabai”) loneliness (Debes Ray’s “Kolkata O
Mahasweta Devi: Mahasweta Devi is perhaps the best-known living writer of the Bengali short story. A staunch critic of the literary establishment, and radical in her social and political views, she writes from a determination to arouse the conscience of her readers. She challenges the writers of our time for their narrow focus on the lives of the urban elite and the middle-class, turning her gaze, instead, upon the plight of the poor and deprived, especially the tribals in India, who, according to her, have consistently been excluded from the discourse of nation. In the Preface to Bashai Tudu, she accuses the writers of her time for “an atrophy of conscience” (xviii). She insists that “in a country bedeviled with so many problems — social injustice, communal discord and evil customs — ... a conscientious writer has to take a firm stand in defence of the exploited” (xviii). All her stories testify to this commitment. In the short story “Bayen”, for instance, she presents the suffering of a woman who is branded a witch and ostracized by her own community of doms or cremation-attendants. “Draupadi” depicts the defiance of Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman gang-raped by the police as a punishment for her activism as a Naxalite. In “Stanadayini”, the wet-nurse Jashoda is employed by the well-to-do family of babus as long as her breast-milk is of use to their infants, only to be abandoned by her foster-sons when she is old and terminally ill. In all these narratives, class, caste, gender and ethnicity are represented as forms of marginality that deny voice and agency to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the “subaltern”. A burning anger animates Mahasweta’s works. In her hands, the Bengali short story becomes a vehicle for powerful social comment, without losing any of its aesthetic sophistication. In her style; too, she is revolutionary, for she breaks away from the usual chaste or colloquial Bengali to create a disruptive idiom in which different forms of language jostle with each other, combining versions of Bengali with Hindi, English and tribal dialect.

1.3 MAHASWETA DEVI: LIFE AND WORKS

Mahasweta Devi was born in Dhaka in 1926. From 1936 to 1938, she studied in Shantiniketan, after which she moved to Beltola School in Kolkata, where her family lived from 1938 to 1944. In 1942, after her Matriculation, she joined Ashutosh College, where she worked actively for famine relief as a member of the Girl Students’ Association. In 1944, they moved to Rangpur, and later in the same year, she joined Shantiniketan as a B.A. student. In 1946, she graduated from Viswabharati with an Honours degree in English, and enrolled for an M.A. in English at Kolkata University. Her studies, however, were interrupted by communal riots.
In 1947, she married Bijon Bhattacharya, and in 1948, their son, Nabarun, was born. For a couple of years, she taught at Padmapukur School and at Ramesh Mitra Balika Bidyalaya, and published features and short stories in Sachitra Bharati under the pseudonym Sumitra Debi. In 1949, she joined the Post and Telegraph Department, but in 1950, was dismissed on suspicion of being a communist. In 1952, she accompanied her husband to Mumbai for a brief period. Her first book, Rani of Jhansi was published in 1956, followed by Wali and Noti in 1957. In 1961, she divorced her husband, and in 1963, received her M.A. (English) degree from Kolkata University. In 1964, she joined Bijaygarh Jyotish Ray College as a lecturer in English. In 1965, she married Asit Gupta. In 1975, they divorced. She continued to write and publish, and received several awards, including the Amrita Puraskar in 1968, the Saratchandra Memorial Medal in 1978, and the Sahitya Akademi Award for Aranyer Adhikar in 1979.

From 1980 onwards, Mahasweta engaged herself actively in the tribal cause. She founded the Palamau Jila Bonded Labour Liberation organization in 1980, and became editor of Bortika, a journal devoted to the lives of tribal in India. From 1982 to 1984, she worked as a reporter for the daily Jugantar. In 1984, she became President of the West Bengal Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samity.

Today, Mahasweta continues to work tirelessly for the welfare of tribals in India. She remains a prolific writer, with novels, short stories, plays, essays and journalistic writings to her credit. She has won numerous honours and awards, including the Bharatiya Jnanpith Award in 1995, the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997, the “Officer des Arts et des Lettres” in France in 2003, the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration in 2005, and the Padma Shri in 1986 and again in 2006.

In the field of Bengali letters, Mahasweta has always been a radical figure, castigating political authorities for exploiting the poor and marginalized, and criticizing the literary establishment for failing to raise their voices against social injustice. According to Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Mahasweta champions the cause of the “subalterns”, the poorest of the poor, who are excluded from the mainstream and denied their rights by an oppressive and exploitative society. Mahasweta perceives herself as a pan-Indian writer, addressing a countrywide readership in order to raise the national conscience about the plight of the lowest segments of our society. Her works reveal an intimate knowledge of the history, politics, lifestyle and mindset of the tribals. In her fiction, she combines different registers of language, including chaste, Sanskritized Bengali, the colloquial idiom with localized flavours, tribal dialect, as well as snatches of Hindi and English. Her characters are drawn
mostly from the poor, oppressed classes, although she has also written about middle-class life and historical personages. History, myth, folklore and contemporary reality combine to create the ethos of her novels, plays and short stories. Many of the stories are located in the tribal regions of Bengal, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

1.4 INTRODUCING THE STORY

The story Salt is translated in English by Sarmishta Dutta Gupta and was published by Sahitya Academy, New Delhi. Mahasweta Devi’s story Salt (1981) is set in Jhujhar, a tribal village along the Palamau Reserve Forest, in the years following the Emergency and the defeat of the Congress in the subsequent elections. It represents the plight of the tribals, deprived of arable forest land by the Hindu traders who came there after the Kole Revolt (1831). When the story begins, the entire village is shackled into forced labour without wages by the landowner Uttamchand. The tribals live off the forest, unaware of their right to a share of the crops on the land they till, until a new minister takes power after the elections in 1977.

The “organized youths”, with Purti Munda, challenge Uttamchand and decree that the tribals must receive half the share of the crops. By way of revenge, Uttamchand decides to deprive the tribals of salt, a basic though cheap commodity:

The people of Jhujhar come for their weekly market to Palani or Muru. All the grocery shops of these two markets belonged to Uttamchand. He said, “Let them have a taste of saltless gruel. Such ingratitude after being fed by me for so long!” (102)

The narrative traces the long-term effect on the tribes of this vindictive strategy. The tribals resort to all kinds of strategies to cope with the problem. They go to the forest contractor, barter crops for salt, pray to Haram Deo and exchange hens for salt. The youth committee asks the medical representative about the importance of salt for the human body, but the answer is bewilderingly technical:

Generally, the functions of salt in the human body are, regulation of the osmosis level; maintenance of the balance of water and blood volume; maintenance of the acid-base balance; supply of the basic essential elements to bones and teeth and maintenance of proper irritability of muscles and nerve cells. It was also essential for coagulation of blood ... All this seemed Greek to him ... (104).

When confronted, Uttamchand claims that the tribals are liars. Eventually, the youths forget the issue.

Meanwhile, Purti discovers another source of salt: the salt lick for wild animals. He also witnesses the mischief wrought by Ekoya, the lone elephant:

Ekoyas are generally unpredictable. Their behaviour and attitude becomes irresponsible as a result of being overthrown and driven out
of the herd. The loner wet the salt lick before he left. Purti realized the animal’s wicked brain behind its mischievous act (107).

The headman warns the tribals not to annoy the elephants, who are known for their vengefulness. The salt-lick is shifted. But Ekoya is suspicious, and changes his habits. At first, the tribals are careful not to be seen when they steal salt from the lick. Then they get bolder, and are seen by Ekoya. Near the Palamau Fort, Ekoya attacks the culprits and tramples them to death:

The elephant is the largest terrestrial animal. But if an angry elephant decides to outwit man it could tread more softly than an ant. Taking care not to crush dry leaves under its feet. Being unbelievably cautious. So when Purti turned around it seemed the old Palamau Fort was approaching them. An elephant looks much bigger than its size as it gets nearer though. The elephant silently used its trunk and feet but the three men screamed madly (112).

An official probe yields puzzling results. Nobody believes that someone could die stealing salt, unless drunk. The “crime” is labeled an irrational act, and taken to prove the need for human intervention in preserving wildlife. Ekoya is declared a rogue, and killed. But the headman is uneasy. Three men and an elephant would not have died if salt was available. He does not have the words to express this insight. He can only say that it is not fair. He returns to his own habitat, knowing that urbanites will never understand how salt could cause a life-and-death battle.

What is the purpose of the story? Who is really to blame for the deaths of three tribals and an elephant? What is Ekoya’s role in the narrative? What is the significance of salt in the context of this story? Let us examine the text in detail.

1.4.1 Themes

Exploitation is the major theme of this story, highlighting the predicament of the innocent tribals who are taken advantage of, not only by Uttamchand, but also by everyone in a position of power. One of Mahasweta’s major concerns, in her fiction as well as in her activist writings, is the denial of land rights to tribals. In her essay “The Slaves of Palamau” (1983), she describes the disastrous effects of “development” in the Palamau area: “At one time the district boasted of great jungles. Today, the jungles are largely destroyed and the district can be described as dry upland” (11). She recounts the growth of the bonded labour system in the region, after the downtrodden people’s revolt against the British and the jagirdars was crushed in 1857. “After 1857, the zamindars and the moneylenders usurped all the land. The kamiauti-seokta or the bandhua system or debt-bondage system was born” (12). The villagers in Salt suffer the long-term effects of this system:

The entire village is shackled by Uttamchand into forced labour without wages. For generations, year after year, they walk twelve miles to Uttamchand’s village Tahar to repay the unwritten debts of their forefathers. For just a few morsels a day and a meagre share of the harvest they till his land without pay. Their share of the crop too is added to their debts (100).
The story demonstrates the nexus between politics at the macro- or national level, and power-structures at the local level, represented by the landowner, the trader, and the youth committee. The authorities are portrayed as deliberately blind to what they do not wish to perceive. The law, it seems, exists in name only, where the poor tribals are concerned. When under pressure from tribals demanding a fair arrangement, Uttamchand finds a "legal" but inhuman mode of retaliation.

The narrative has a strong didactic element, problematizing the issue of justice and making a strong appeal to the reader's social conscience. Purti's role in the tragedy highlights the impossibility of making black-and-white moral judgements in certain situations. The headman accuses Purti of endangering the lives of his entire community through his carelessness in allowing the elephant to see him stealing salt:

"Purti, I wonder what punishment you deserve. Those tribals who leave the village for mines or cities to work as porters remain there. But you came back. You failed and thought that you knew the world much better. So you took up cudgels against Uttamchand. He is a tiger. Besides, you have now earned the wrath of the elephant" (111).

Yet, after the deaths of "three men and an elephant", the headman feels that "[s]omeone else was responsible" (113). Where life is reduced to a bare struggle for survival, conventional morality ceases to apply. Purti violates the law, but the text suggests that the actual blame lies elsewhere. The story constructs a parallel between Ekoya and Purti, each a loner, struggling for survival, each destroyed by "rule" and "the system". The law of the jungle is juxtaposed against human law, to suggest, ironically, that the latter is not necessarily more just.

1.4.2 The Ending

The last two paragraphs of the story are crucial to this didactic theme. Thinking about the unnecessary deaths of three tribals and Ekoya, the headman feels uncomfortable with the official version of the story:

Apparently it was clear that the elephant had killed men and got killed in turn. But the indirect cause seemed to lie elsewhere (113).

He wonders who is responsible:

Three men and an elephant wouldn't have had to die if salt was available. Someone else was responsible, someone else. The one who didn't sell salt? Or some other rule? Some other system? The rule and the system which allowed Uttamchand to go scot-free for not selling salt? (113)

Although he does not have the sophisticated vocabulary to analyze the implications of this perception, he senses that "[t]his has not been fair at all" (113). A grave injustice has been done, but it would be futile to convince the authorities of this. The headman leads the villagers back across the sandy river-bed to Jhujhar, realizing that they could not hope to have their problems understood by urbanites:
They walked fast. They would feel at ease only after returning to their own way of life which is bereft of mistrust, which does not try to simplify Puri’s death and does not attempt to use such oversimplification to deny the reality of their existence. To that life (114).

1.4.3 Characterization

Puri, in many ways the central figure in the narrative, belongs to the tribal community, but remains a loner, all the same. In his ingenious and tenacious efforts to circumvent the scarcity of salt, he demonstrates the human will to survive.

Uttamchand is projected as a “villain”, but to blame him solely for the problems of the tribals would be to misread the text. The rhetoric of the text, in fact, places the blame on the system that empowers Uttamchand to exploit and torment the tribals.

The youth committee is well-meaning and altruistic, but its members lack commitment and true understanding of the situation at the grassroots level.

The headman exemplifies practical common sense. He has an intuition of the message the story is meant to convey, but lacks the words to articulate it: “This has not been fair at all”. He could toss only these few words at the babus present there and left the place with his villagers . . . (113-114).

Ekoya, though an animal, is almost a character in the story, invested with human traits. He seems more human than the inhumane Uttamchand.

1.4.4 Narrative Technique

Though the story is about simple folk, the narrative is not simple. It uses elements of satire, myth, history and science, to construct a scathing critique of social irresponsibility. The altruistic but shallow idealism of the youth commission representative is subjected to scathing satiric scrutiny:

The young man returned home defeated and made a noble vow to open cooperative stores in the Jhujhar belt at the first available opportunity. Later he became busy in resolving a dispute over an illegal liquor shop elsewhere and forgot about Jhujhar (107).

The elephant Ekoya is mythified, identified with the ancient Palamau Fort in the depths of the forest, suggesting a primordial landscape that casts modern human history in a reductive light:

The scene was very symbolic. Palamau Fort in the backdrop, river, sands, sky, night, lonely elephant. Very peaceful and eternal. The only difference was that the thoughts crossing the elephant’s mind weren’t particularly conducive to flying white pigeons (110).

Uttamchand’s ancestry and his exploitation of the tribals is linked to the history of the region:
The land belongs to Uttamchand. His ancestors were among those Hindu traders who came into the region after the Kole Revolt of 1831. It was extremely easy then as it is now to evict these tribes by buying off their land (99).

There is an elemental quality to the representation of Ekoya. The wild elephant stands for the forces of nature, simultaneously strong and under threat from human “civilization”, dependant on human largesse but capable of acting as an agent of violent, primitive retribution. The identification of Ekoya with Purti pitches the struggle for survival at a primordial, elemental level: the loner, in each case, is singled out for elimination, suggesting that in a normative structure, transgression comes at a price. The tribals have a close affinity to nature, but are apparently less important to human society than animals, as the rhetoric of wildlife conservation would suggest.

The most salient formal characteristic of the story is its use of irony to comment on social discrimination. The gap between the real experience of the tribals and the way the situation is officially reported and handled highlights the vast distance that separates the empowered from the powerless:

They went to steal salt from the elephants' lick and died! The words of the inspector became an epitaph for the dead proving that the tribals of Jhujhar were not trustworthy at all. Herbivorous animals needed salt. What if men began to steal that too! This unnatural act of Purti and his kinsmen again emphasized the difficulty of preserving wildlife without human interference (113).

That salt, such a humble thing, could become a matter of survival for an entire community, is incomprehensible to “civilized” society: ignorance sanctions indifference and incredulity. The Ekoyas and Puritis of this world have no scope for survival in such a system.

The text is also notable for its sophisticated use of point of view. The omniscient narrator reports the thoughts and feelings of the human actors in the drama, but he also seems to understand animal psychology.

1.4.5 Language

In the Bengali original, the language of the text is a highly sophisticated blend of different registers of Bengali, combined with tribal dialect, Hindi spoken in the idiom of this region in Bihar, and a smattering of technical English terms used to describe the scientific and medical value of salt for the human body.

The story is notable for its use of figurative language. The central image of salt, a simple but vital ingredient for human survival, is identified with the lives of the tribals. The quest for forbidden salt demonstrates the basic, primitive level of their struggle to stay alive in a world where even animals are better cared for. Salt, though a humble, ordinary substance, is essential for life. To deny it to the tribals is to deny their right to live.

The tone of the narrative is matter-of-fact, even when recounting disastrous events. The style is spare and minimalistic. Very few adjectives are used. The clipped language in which the deaths of Purti and Ekoya are reported indicates the callous attitude of the authorities towards the plight of tribals as well as animals.
1.5 TRANSLATION: SOME PROBLEMS

In the English translation, much of this deliberate linguistic dissonance is impossible to retain, resulting in a dilution of the story’s stylistic impact. Salt, for example, is referred to as nun (standard Bengali), laban (local/colloquial) and nimak (derived from Hindi) by different characters in the narrative, as a marker of social stratification and cultural difference. In the English translation, these differentiations are lost, and the word used uniformly throughout the text is, simply, salt. Such loss of nuance is, to an extent, inevitable in all translations, but particularly significant in the case of Mahasweta Devi’s works, because of the rich linguistic layering of the original texts. As Minoli Salgado points out, “her stories, written in a distinctive style, pose particular challenges for the translator. Not only is the surface realism of her stories destabilized by mythic and satiric configurations, but the language used is itself unfixed, incorporating a mixture of folk dialects and urbane Bengali, slang and Shakespeare, Hindu mythology and quotations from Marx” (132).

There are some grammatical errors in the English translation of the story, such as the use of words like “spitted” and “extortioners”. The phrase “eight bucks” (103) in the mouth of a tribal strikes a false note. Elsewhere, references to Uttamchand’s “defeats” (102), the “utter darkness” in which “Puri and his folks” are condemned to remain (107) and the “discontent elephants” (109) are instances of similar awkwardness of translation.

The transition from source text to target language is not always smooth, and Mahasweta’s narratives are especially difficult to translate. All the same, translations of Mahasweta’s works remain valuable as a means of accessing the writings of one of the major Indian writers of our time.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

To sum up: in this unit, we have acquainted ourselves with the salient features of the Bengali short story, learned about the life and writings of Mahasweta Devi, and attempted a close reading of her short story Salt, in order to appreciate the importance of her contribution to the development of Bengali literature. In our reading, Mahasweta emerges as a writer with a strong social conscience, who is also deeply aware of the aesthetic aspects of the craft of the short story writer. Clearly, she deserves the position she enjoys today as a writer of national stature and international repute.

1.8 GLOSSARY

Kamaldaha: a famous lake in the Palamau region
Koel: a river in Jharkhand
Kole Revolt: During the Kole Birodh, the Larka Hos raised their voices against the British. Other groups joined the protest. The rebellion was suppressed and pacified by Wilkinson’s Law, now prevailing in the Kolhan area of Jharkhand.

Maroa: a kind of gruel

Palamau Fort: a sixteenth century fort built by the Adivasi king Medini Ray. Palamau is in the Daltonanj district of Jharkhand.

Tari: a very cheap country liquor

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. How does Mahasweta Devi use salt as a metaphor for the process of exploitation as represented in the story?
2. Discuss the significance of Ekoya in the critique of contemporary structures of power in Mahasweta Devi’s Salt.
3. Comment on the deployment of history as an instrument of social criticism in the narrative.
4. Salt combines stringent political comment with sophisticated literary technique. Discuss.

1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


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